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ABSTRACT

Performance assessment offers an approach to assessment different from that of group-administered standardized tests by documenting activities in which children engage on a daily basis. Flexible enough to reflect individual academic achievement and designed to evaluate elements of learning not captured by standardized tests, the Work Sampling System offers an exemplar of how performance assessment works in early childhood and the primary years. This system assesses and documents children's skills, knowledge, behavior, and accomplishments across a variety of education domains and as manifested on multiple occasions. It consists of three components: (1) developmental guidelines and checklists; (2) portfolios; and (3) summary reports. The developmental guidelines and checklists assist teachers in observing and documenting children's progress across seven domains of development. These domains are divided into functional components, each of which contains performance indicators that represent important skills, knowledge, behaviors, and accomplishments. The guidelines that accompany the checklists make the process of observation more reliable and consistent. The checklists and guidelines create a profile of children's individualized progress. Portfolios, which are collections of children's work, provide a rich documentation of each child's experiences throughout the year. In the Work Sampling System, portfolio collections are based on two types of work: core items, which represent a particular area of learning within a single domain; and individualized items, which offer examples of children's work across domains. Summary reports, completed three times a year, consist of performance and progress ratings in each domain, and teachers' reflections and comments about the child's development. They are a means of translating the information in the checklists and portfolios into a more easily understood document for parents, teachers, and administrators. Contains seven references. (BC)

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Performance Assessment in Early Childhood Education: The Work Sampling System

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The pressure to demonstrate effectiveness through children's performance on standardized tests not only changes how teachers teach and what children study, but also seems to be changing our very understanding of the nature of learning and achievement (McGill-Franzen & Allington, 1993).

Group-administered tests focus on the acquisition of simple facts, low-level skills, superficial memorization, and isolated evidence of achievement. The tests hold great power, and that power can be abused. Of greatest concern is that they rob teachers of their sense of judgment about how to help children develop to their optimal potential.

This loss of judgment is often observed in the use of readiness and early school achievement tests. The appropriateness of using standardized, group-administered achievement tests for children below third grade is highly dubious and questionable. The content of these tests is generally abstract, verbally mediated, and potentially biased against children unfamiliar or uncomfortable with test-like activities and with middle class manners and mores (Stallman & Pearson, 1990). Even more problematic is how little can be learned from the results of standardized tests administered to young children; the data may tell us a child's percentile ranking on a subtest, but they cannot tell us whether the child's performance reflects an inability to follow the complex test directions or whether the child did not have mastery of the information or skill.

Performance assessment offers a new approach that documents activities in which children engage on a daily basis. It is flexible enough to reflect individual academic achievement and designed to evaluate many elements of learning and development not captured by standardized tests. It puts assessment back where it belongs: in the hands of teachers and children, and in the classrooms in which they work (Meisels, Dorfman, & Steele, 1995).

The Work Sampling System

The Work Sampling System (Meisels, Jablon, et al., 1995) offers an exemplar of how performance assessment works in Head Start, early childhood, and the primary years (ages 3 to 11). This performance assessment system assesses and documents children's skills, knowledge, behavior, and accomplishments as displayed across a wide variety of education domains and as manifested on multiple occasions. Work sampling is a curriculum-embedded assessment, rather than an "on demand" set of tests. It systematizes teacher observations by guiding those observations with specific criteria and well-defined procedures. It consists of three complementary components: (1) Developmental Guidelines and Checklists, (2) Portfolios, and (3) Summary Reports. Classroom-based and instructionally relevant, these components involve the child, the child's family, the teacher, and the school administration in the processes of assessment.

Developmental Guidelines and Checklists

The Developmental Guidelines and Checklists are designed to assist teachers in observing and documenting individual children's growth and progress. They are intended to reflect common activities and expectations in classrooms that are structured around developmentally appropriate activities and are based on national, state, and local curriculum standards. Teachers should be able to complete the Checklists without testing their children. Each Checklist covers seven domains: (1) Personal and social development; (2) Language and literacy; (3) Mathematical thinking; (4) Scientific thinking; (5) Social studies; (6) The Arts; and (7) Physical development.

Each domain is divided into functional components, each of which contains performance indicators that represent important skills, knowledge, behaviors, and accomplishments. Guidelines accompanying the Checklists enhance the process of observation, make it more reliable, and help ensure consistency by providing a rationale and illustrations for each performance indicator. The Checklists and Guidelines create a profile of children's individualized progress. Because of the common structure of the Checklists from preschool through grade 5, teachers can chart children's progress over a wide span of time and development and plan a curriculum that reflects individual growth and change.

Portfolios

Purposeful collections of children's work that illustrate their efforts, progress, and achievements. Portfolios are used in The Work Sampling System to provide rich documentation of each child's experiences throughout the year. Portfolio

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collection enables children to become involved with the process of selecting and judging their own work. Portfolio content should parallel classroom activities and lead to the development of new activities based on joint teacher-child assessment of the child's progress and interests.

The Work Sampling System is a relatively structured approach to Portfolio collection that relies on the identification and collection of two types of work: Core Items (representations of a particular area of learning within a domain that are selected three times a year); and Individualized Items (unique examples of a child's work that capture the child's interests and experiences and reflect integrated learning across domains). Collecting Portfolio items on multiple occasions allows the Portfolio to become a tool for documenting, analyzing, and summarizing the child's growth and development through the entire school year.

Portfolios are powerful instructional tools. They offer children, teachers, parents, administrators, and policymakers an opportunity to view the sweep and power of children's growth and development. Above all, they integrate instruction and assessment.

Summary Reports

The final component of The Work Sampling System is the summary report, completed three times a year for each child. This report consists of a brief summary of the child's classroom performance and is based on teacher observations and on records teachers keep as part of The Work Sampling System. The report contains specific criteria for evaluating children's performance in each domain of learning and behavior that is emphasized in the classroom.

The Summary Report is a means of translating the rich information from Developmental Checklists and Portfolios into a more easily understood and interpreted document for parents, teachers, and administrators. Summary reports are designed to replace report cards. They consist of performance and progress ratings in each domain, and teachers' reflections and comments about the child's development, based on the evidence accumulated in the Checklists and Portfolios.

Conclusion

Tests are powerful only if we attach high stakes to them and relinquish our judgment about how to educate children (Meisels, 1992). Some tests are less informative than others, and some are hopelessly biased, narrow, or unrealistic; but any test can be misused, just as any idea can be distorted.

Work Sampling is a powerful substitute for group-administered achievement tests. Research about The Work Sampling System shows that it provides teachers with reliable and valid data about children's school performance (Meisels, Liaw, Dorfman, & Fails, in press) and with a great deal of information and evidence about children's activities and development that can be used to enhance instruction and to report to children's parents. It is based on teachers' perceptions of their children in actual classroom situations. It simultaneously informs, expands, and structures those perceptions while involving children and parents in the learning process. The Guidelines and Checklists provide detailed, observation-based information about the child's skills, accomplishments, knowledge, and behavior. The Portfolios highlight qualitative aspects of children's work. The Summary Reports help record, summarize, and aggregate information on children's overall educational progress.

Performance assessment, of which The Work Sampling System is an example, allows teachers to record what children can do in the context of their experience. When children's experience is rich and diverse, invites them to display their initiative, and engages their curiosity, then performance assessment promises to help us learn about children as we watch them learn about their world.

Adapted from: Meisels, Samuel J. (1993). Remaking Classroom Assessment with The Work Sampling System. *Young Children* 48(5, July): 34-40. EJ 465 921.

For More Information

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